

Treasure News

February 2018



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Cover Story: The Esoteric Craft Of Pocket Hunting

The old-timers who joined the California Gold Rush of 1849 included those who brought with them experience based knowledge of **pocket hunting** or **pocket mining** that they developed in the eastern goldfields of North Carolina and Georgia. The vast majority of the 49er pioneers either knew next to nothing at all about mining gold or only understood “placer mining” or “quartz (hard rock) mining”. A handful of pocket miners, however, carried on their craft for the next several decades. By the 1890s only a few of those stalwarts remained alive and productive. One particular miner recognized that soon the mysterious art and craft of pocket hunting might be lost to future generations. So he set down what he knew about pocket hunting and his manuscripts were published as a series of five articles in the MINING & SCIENTIFIC PRESS (a mining journal published between 1860 and 1921) in 1893 under the pseudonym of Alex Quartz.

Credit for the source material of this cover story goes to “EMF” who posted his digitalized and edited reconstruction of the original writings entitled OLD TIME PROSPECTING METHODS dated 4-4-2013 on the CANADIAN GOLD PROSPECTING FORUM. Our PCSC website has a link to the posting history of that forum topic. The following *Treasure News* cover story attempts to briefly summarize and examine only the core gist of pocket hunting fact and theory. References and citations are made to the digitalized material contained in the CANADIAN GOLD PROSPECTING FORUM as referenced above, however your editor assumes

full responsibility for his own inferences, contributions, added edits, observations and comments.

The **great virtue** of pocket mining recognized by the old-timers was that it could be practiced for a very small outlay of capital, unlike the heavy infrastructure required by placer and quartz mining. All one needed was a “pick, pan, shovel and grubstake” plus, of course, the knowledge of how to recognize and exploit the many pockets of gold. A gold pocket could be cleaned of all its nuggets over a very short time period by a single prospector before moving on to the next one.

A key initial concept to understand is that a pocket is actually a unique type of **formation**; i.e., a “pocket formation”. The mineral ingredients of a pocket formation (besides the precious metals of gold or sometimes silver) invariably consist of IRON, COPPER, LIME, SULPHUR and LEAD. The remainder of the pocket typically consists of a soft porphyry, i.e., a decomposed grayish slate material.

The **meaning of a pocket** is: “...a mass of valuable mineral concentrated within a small space in a ledge, lead or vein...” They can be large or very small. A “ledge, lead or vein” refers to the primary quartz structure that runs through the country rock. There are **two primary types of ledges**: “pocket ledges” and

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“milling ledges”. The **milling ledges** refer to the primary quartz vein that hard rock miners must crush in order to

extract gold. They typically are mostly barren and can only be economically mined on a large scale yielding only small quantities of gold or silver per ton or cubic yard of milling ledge material. Most significantly these **milling ledges generally run north and south** especially in northern California and southern Oregon.

The **pocket ledges** are those that “cut across the formation”. On the west coast the **pocket ledges primarily run in an east and west** orientation. The chief minerals that predominate in pocket ledge formations are IRON and LIME embedded in a porphyry material (note: calcite is a modern word for lime).

The gold pockets in which gold nuggets are concentrated occur at the intersection of the milling ledges and the pocket ledges.

There are three distinct sub-types of pockets, only one of which will be covered by this brief *Treasure News* summary. It is called a “**free pocket**” — decomposed structures generally found near the surface and which “...throw out a strong **trace**, and as a rule are easily found.” They are typically small with gold nugget contents that rarely exceed 100 ounces. The gold in these free pockets is often “...so well freed from the quartz, iron, and other minerals that it does not require crushing...”.

Free pockets always involve a “... cross seam or ledge which cuts, crosses or comes in contact with the ledge or seam **at the point where the pocket occurs.**” The cross or contact ledge

is “...entirely composed of a different mineral from that which predominates in the (milling) ledge which contains the pocket and is often very small, sometimes not more than a fourth of an inch in thickness. It... “always runs at an angle to the general course of the main ledge. There is often a loose place running out from the pockets of this class resembling an old caved in gopher hole, **from which gold will be found scattered on the surface.**” A free pocket “...**is always on top of the ground**, in the grass roots as it is termed...”.

Of particular interest to PCSC readers of the *Treasure News* is that certain PCSC members and your editor have come across what seem to be such free pockets or, in some cases, the remnant edges of incompletely excavated free pockets. One of these remnant structures is located on PCSC’s **Shotgun** Claim in Kern County and another that appears to be a more complete free pocket is located on PCSC’s **Desert Queen Bee** Claim near Barstow in San Bernardino County. Yet another such likely spot is located in Holcomb Valley on a former GPAA claim.

One of your editor’s “takes your breath away” moments involved the recovery of 140 nuggets in the space of just six hours. The **photograph on the following page** displays those 140 rough, uncleaned nuggets. But they are dwarfed by the gold shown **in the cover photo**. Those cupped hands are holding **three**

pounds of rough, uncleaned gold nuggets and they belong to my friend and fellow PCSC member **Dave Held** who discovered the pocket a few months earlier.

He invited me to his claim and when I visited, just as the 1893 article described, I came across a loose place where the nuggets — little ones at first — were scattered throughout a free milling decomposed material lying just beneath the stony litter atop the surface soil that resembled a whitish-gray powder or soda ash just about the consistency of processed lime interspersed with crystalline gold often loosely attached to what appeared to be a decomposed slate-like stony material. Numerous times I would have between 4 and 6 separate nuggets in my scoop at the same time!! Not one single piece of metallic trash interfered with my



metal detecting labors. I was absolutely stunned by this discovery and will never forget the adrenaline rush of that experience as long as I may live. Now, of course, I am on a constant lookout for another free pocket — a holy grail off sorts for incurably goldbug bitten true believers.

Alex Quartz, the original author, completes his treatment of free pockets by explaining what he means by a “**trace**”. “A **pocket trace** is the gold and other minerals which are liberated or forced out from the pocket and by their specific gravity gradually work down hill, naturally spreading out over the surface ... until it finds level or works into some gulch or ravine.” “But in the majority of cases the gold and the mineral that comes with it from the pocket are in the surface dirt.” Thus, we can see that what started out as an embedded free pocket will over time spread itself out. How many patches have we discovered that seem to fit this expanded description?

One final observation that Alex Quartz made way back in 1893 seems even more apt today. He vents his frustration with sloppy miners: “**I have seen places where prospectors had followed up traces until the gold gave out, and then dug hole after hole and tore up the earth in such manner that it would be almost impossible for the next prospector who came along to find out where the gold gave out.**”

Sound familiar??